

Jeremiah 32:1-15
John 2:13-22

Buying Real Estate in a War Zone

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Pastor Takako is away this Sunday and has asked me to fill in. And I know you have me pegged by now as one for whom Stewardship is a favorite topic. And we're going a few things different this year. You heard Elder Susanna awhile back describe how we changed the calendar year of our pledging to the Spring, to coincide with new life bursting around us. And you've heard a few members of the team give personal talks about valuing this church we all support. And Barb Allen and I are the first members of a task group that will work on a major gift campaign. What do I mean by major gifts? – I mean giving above and beyond our regular giving into an account to build up over time enough of a financial backup to keep operating further into the future, beyond immediate bills – maintaining our building, paying our Pastor, caring for the needy and poor in the valley. We had such a back-up, but it is depleting.

We are a small church in a lightly populated valley. But we've done this before. And David Whitely tried to get this going before his retirement date – some of you were on that team, but we ran out of time. Now we are picking that idea up again. (Barb and I wouldn't mind a couple of others to volunteer and partner with us on our team.). There is not an emergency yet, but let's not go there!

SO... if one watches or reads the News, it seems like calamity and turmoil world-wide – in our local politics (state and national), and a world once again in the midst of war. The Pandemic didn't help, and certainly didn't give us any sense of security. And do I want to talk with you about finances, the future, how to plan in such a world? Absolutely! And I'll start with the prophet Jeremiah.

This text is interesting. Jeremiah had told King Zedekiah things he didn't want to hear, and Zedekiah had the prophet under house arrest. Jerusalem was under siege by a vastly superior Babylonian army. It would only be a short time until Babylon captured Jerusalem and carried its citizens off into captivity. Jeremiah saw this coming – probably *everybody* saw this coming – but sometimes those in power don't respond too well by being told the obvious! Your investment counselor about then would say then it might be a good idea to keep all your assets liquid!

So what did Jeremiah do? He bought real estate. Jeremiah's field was the place he ought to be. Anathoth, a little village (like ours?) west of Jerusalem was Jeremiah's familial home, and the field belonged to his relatives. As next of kin he had first right of refusal on any sale; he could pay off the mortgage and take ownership. Not out of any hope the disaster would fail to materialize - he was the prophet who predicted it. (The King was the one in denial: "The Babylonians will not take the city!" Jeremiah: "Sure they will. I think I'll put a gazebo on the north side of the olive trees. What do you think?")

Jeremiah bought real estate because there is always life on the other side. That is God's answer. The prophet did it with a mundane and ordinary contract, buying the field and putting his money where his mouth was, where his heart was. A dramatic symbol of his belief that out of tragedy, God would ultimately send deliverance. Out of troubles, peace. Out of death, resurrection. Because that is why God does.

William Leety had this paraphrase of Jeremiah in an issue of *Presbyterian Outlook*:

The word that comes to Jeremiah from the Lord
in July of 1945 in the reign of Hirohito in Japan:
buy a field in Hiroshima and a house in Nagasaki.
Houses and fields shall again be bought in this land.

The word that comes to Jeremiah from the Lord
In the years of Pol Pot in Cambodia:
Buy a rice paddy in the killing fields,
Houses and fields and vineyards
shall again be bought in this land.

The word that comes to Jerermiah from the Lord
in the first year of President Bush of the United States of America:
buy and empty block in the South Bronx,
and buy a crack house in East L.A.
Houses shall again be bought in this land
and parks created and schools built;
and people shall flock to the neighborhoods
because of the learning in the schools
and the quality of common life.

Buy and old family farm in Appalachia
and buy a house along the fault line in the San Fernando Valley
and buy a factory beside a river in a Rust Belt city.
Invest in acreage that has been clear cut
or a landfill, or a toxic waste dump;
spend yourself on neighborhoods with the highest crime rates;
buy a hotel in Sarajevo and a farm in Rwanda.
But a sawmill that mills only crosses.
Accept an invitation to supper where all you're promised
is a crust of a loaf or a tablespoon in wine.

It'll take a long time, but
'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be...'
Bread is down payment on the house and field,
and wine the mortgage on the vineyard.
And the One who commands is fulfillment
of all hope for the world and in the world.

Buy a field in Anathoth, God said, because "houses and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." And in doing so, Jeremiah made a down payment on the future. An investment in hope. We could add some defiance of our own to the poem: "Buy a house in eastern Ukraine. Build a house on the permafrost in the Arctic circle. Paul Lehmann wrote he future shapes the present out of the past." When Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian was established right here 142 years ago, the very first Protestant church in the valley, there was no sure bet it would take root and make it. There

were challenges of getting along with indigenous neighbors, encountering wild critters, Rocky Mountain Fever, and other frontier diseases... But we made it. We have a heroic story!

Jesus clearing money changers from the temple told in all 4 gospels. The only coin worshippers could use to get a sacrificial pigeon or whatever was the Tyrian shekel, Roman approved. BUT it had a graven image on it. Whoops. Irony alert! Against the faith. Money-changers were a necessary function – worshippers could pay in *their* coin, the “bank” could get the animal, and sacrifice could be made. But money changers would be getting a HUGE profit on the rate exchange. Price gouging. Jesus’ turning over the table was an act of justice on behalf of the faithful. When they said that he threatened to tear down the temple, ruin people’s faith, he said “No. YOU tear down the Temple, and I’ll have it raised in three days. Gospel writer John wants us to hear the words “Resurrection,” and empty tomb. Jesus replaced the Temple with himself. He didn’t just speak God’s word. He IS God’s word.

The challenged never end, but let’s today kick off the real work toward planned major giving that will secure our future. We’ll get into the “how” specifics later, and we have friends in the Presbytery, the village, the pew next to us. I’m guessing that most of the people in our village will say that we matter. They may have needed assistance from the Food Bank, they may come worship but don’t want to join (for their own reasons), they may come here for contemplative prayer, or AA meetings, other support gatherings, community celebrations, musical concerts, counseling and support, workshops or educational events, etc. Maybe they just like to hang out with you & me & Jesus.

Point being, we’re an important weave in the Jemez Springs rug. Buy a house, plant a field, put down roots in the Jemez Valley, in Sand Diego Canyon, Jemez, SLP, La Cueva. God is not done with us. Look around you at those who will share the work with you. We are a mixed bag of seasoned saints, naïve converts, those who’ve been here for years and prayed their way through good times and bad, those who are newer seekers, others passing through on the surface. Some abused, confused, and bemused, most of us broken in some way or another and knitted back a little crooked. We have children still in formation, and some of us with little memory left to recall (unless you catch me on a good day) some on a righteous cause and some looking for a quiet place to pray. Put us all together and what do you have? The Church of Jesus Christ! Try and tear this particular temple down and we’ll have it back up in three days.

Small but mighty, we matter! Let’s grow us a bigger, stronger church! It is an investment in the future. It is a down-payment on the church that is not yet, but ought to be – the church that isn’t yet but *will* be. It *will* be because through Jesus Christ, God has the final word!

Historian Edward Gibbon tells this story: In 211 BCE, the middle of the Second Punic War, the brilliant General Hannibal of Carthage carefully led his forced on elephants across the Alps, and laid siege to Rome, intending to destroy the city. The Romans panicked when they learned that Hannibal had overwhelmed the city’s defenses and was camped on the plains just outside of the city walls. With battle at hand, the Roman Senate met to consider whether to surrender Rome to avoid bloodbath and death. As the story goes, in the midst of the discussion, one senator – a man named Cincinnatus – arose to express his desire to buy a plot of land. Not just any plot, however, but a particular piece of land: Cincinnatus wanted to buy, at full market value, the very spot on which Hannibal had that night encamped his army.

Houses and field and vineyard shall again be bought in this land.

So says the prophet; so says the prophet's God.

Love Jesus. Love one another. Love the church. God has promised to give us the future.